

A NOTE ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE TREE HYRAX

By

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With reference to Mr. J. B. Sale's article in Vol. XXIII, No. 5, January 1960, of this journal, and in the hope of adding to the information on the little-known habits of the Tree Hyrax, *Dendrohyrax*, I offer the following for what it is worth. Most of my observations were from a close study of an adult male that was kept as a pet, and which did in fact once belong to Lady Baden-Powell.

DIURNAL HABITS—This animal took up residence in the roof of the house, and was little seen during daylight hours. It did, however, come out to bask on an exposed stone prominence adjacent to its roof entry on most sunny days. Occasionally, and usually when guests were present, it would appear at tea-time and would become most active, particularly in its demand for cake. I imagine that on such occasions it was attracted by the drone of voices beneath the place in the roof in which it slept. A bush-baby we kept, and which also lived in the roof, frequently behaved in the same way.

NOCTURNAL HABITS—This animal usually appeared shortly after the wireless was turned on for the nine o'clock news. Sometimes it would appear sooner, but it would sit motionless on a chair or sofa, and to all outward appearance seemed to be in a coma.

Once the news broadcast commenced it would suddenly become active, and as a preliminary it would run to and fro along the back of the sofa, jump to the floor and scamper across to an arm chair, showing every sign of intense interest.

Having selected a perch it would then squat and slowly lower its head until its chin was touching the perch. At the same time the white hairs on its dorsal gland would slowly rise until they were erect, and the gland would swell into a visible "bump" on its back, and would appear to excrete an oily substance.

At this juncture its jaws would slowly open until the teeth were bared, and seen in this position the general appearance of the animal was both fascinating and macabre. I never made up my mind as to whether it was displaying exquisite pain or ecstasy. Possibly an admixture of both.

Then, with jaws fully extended, and dorsal gland fully distended, it would suddenly break into its characteristic ear-splitting call. If the wireless was still on it sometimes repeated the performance, and invariably its display would be followed by a pronounced erection of the penis. On the completion of this it would lick its lips and hop about as if nothing had happened, almost as if it heartily disapproved of emotional outbursts.

As soon as the wireless was turned off it would scamper away through the door into the night.

This animal became most attached to members of the household, particularly to my cousin, and it frequently came into his bedroom about midnight, through the open window, crept between the sheets and went to sleep by his feet.

From observations of this particular animal my deductions were:

- I. Mainly nocturnal, sleeping during most of the day, except to sun itself for a short period during the early afternoon.
- II. Most active during the first part of the night, up to about midnight
- III. Not attracted by the 7 p.m. news, but responsive at the 9 p.m. news. Not responsive to music or any other sound on the wireless, except the voice of a male announcer, and I conclude that the general tone and vibration caused by a male voice on the wireless was the nearest approach to the call of another tree hyrax!
- IV. It would seem that the display as described above leading up to the call, was basically motivated by a sex impulse.
- V. With regard to food, this animal was entirely herbivorous, although it did accept odd tit-bits such as cake, milk, etc. Its favourites, as far as we could determine, were privet, *Ligustrum*, rose leaves, and wild laburnum, *Crotalaria*, but since it had the run of the garden at night it no doubt had other food plants.

Although it could at any time have gained complete freedom by returning to the forest, it chose to live out its life in, and in the vicinity of, the house, and in fact died a natural death at the foot of my cousin's bed, about a week after the death of my cousin.

With regard to the Tree Hyrax in its natural state, I can hardly add to the little that is known about this curious little animal. During three years' active service in the Emergency, mainly in the Aberdares, I can record the following observations:

Hyrax were abundant throughout the tree forest areas and mainly in mature stands of cedar in which the many hollow trunks afforded warm dry shelter.

Sometimes the hyrax could be seen on a hot sunny afternoon sunning themselves on a large exposed branch adjacent to their hole.

Little mounds of droppings on either one or the other side of the trees occupied by hyrax indicated that they invariably cast their droppings in one spot.

At the base of occupied trees there were usually one or more little runs, similar to those made by field rodents, leading into the adjoining undergrowth, used presumably, whilst foraging at night. Sometimes I found that a run led to a stump or exposed portion of a fallen tree, which was worn smooth. It is possible that such places are used by hyrax when "calling".

Although an occasional hyrax could be heard calling at various times of night, there appeared to be two distinct periods when it seemed as if every hyrax in the forest was calling, and on clear nights and particularly on moonlit nights, this was most noticeable. The first call period commenced at about 9 p.m. and maintained its loudest for about half an hour, after which it tailed off and ceased completely at about 10.30 p.m. So regular was this that on a number of occasions when my watch had stopped I would set it to 9 p.m. on the opening call of the hyrax, and on every occasion it was found accurate to within 15 minutes! The second period would be between 2 and 3 a.m. with a few calls up to within half an hour of dawn.

Although living singly or at most in couples, each to its individual tree, the obvious

interchange of calls at night, together with the ground "runs" found between tree and tree, leads me to believe that colonies exist in the same way as with Rock Hyrax. I can well imagine that during darkness there is a considerable "get-together" amongst members of each colony.

Hyrax were easily trapped in very great numbers by forest terrorists. I found a great many traps and without exception these were set at the base of trees that were inhabited by hyrax and at the spot that was used when descending or ascending.

The trap comprised a foot noose made of fine home-spun twine laid on the ground and attached to the tip of a bamboo shoot bent over like a taut bow, and released by a simple trigger device set beneath the noose. By this means so many were trapped that in some areas of the Aberdares the call of the hyrax became a rarity. Their reproductive capacity is obviously high, because today they appear to be as numerous as they were before.

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AN ANTING DISPLAY BY THE BLACK-BELLIED SEED-CRACKER

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On the morning of January 9, 1960, a male Black-bellied Seed-Cracker, *Pirenestes ostrinus* (Vieillot), was observed "anting" in a fork of the main trunk of a Para rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) some 20 feet from the ground in the Botanic Gardens, Entebbe, Uganda.

A small pile of leaves had gathered in the fork and a number of ants about half an inch in length had evidently made their nest there. The bird sat among the leaves, scrabbled among them with its feet and at the same time fluffed the lower belly feathers and made the shuffling movements with the wings usual in most passerines during washing. The latter were both held drooped and tented over the flanks during the movements. In addition, the beak was plunged downwards among the leaves and drawn under the belly between the wings in repeated movements.

In this way the ants were evidently pushed or placed among the lower body feathers and on the inner surface of the wings. Ants were seen running out over the flanks and rump of the bird at the same time. The bird visited the ants three times for a duration of about five minutes on each occasion. Between the visits it sat on a nearby twig wiping its beak on it and making further shuffling movements with the wings. After some 20 minutes' observation with binoculars, x 8, and a telescope, x 20, the bird departed.

The behaviour most resembles the "indirect" anting of Simmons (1959) but the additional beak movements suggest "direct" participation and orientation of the activity by the bird. It is considered to be a combination of both the "direct" and the "indirect" anting methods.

Reference

SIMMONS, K. E. L., 1959. Anting Movements. *Ibis* 101, 368-372.

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